A Fifth Way of Knowing- Memory

The traditional Theory of Knowledge diagram deduces that there are only four means to gains knowledge- Emotion, Language, Reason and Sense Perception. But, if one is not able to retain any of this knowledge, would any of it be worth learning? This is where memory comes into play, making it a potential new Way of Knowing. Memory has strong influence/relationships with the other WOK and vice versa. For example with Emotion; a “natural instinct” or feeling we get is based on a previous experience or knowledge from the past that influences our response to it in the present. In essence, memory is like a storage system that keeps record of experiences in our lives. Some of which is remembered for only a short while (short term memory), while other things are remembered for a life time ( long term memory). Even “being knowledgeable” is defined as information acquired through experience, implying that memory enables us to be knowledgeable through information that we recall. But the issue with memory is when it is definitively used to set facts straight. And if this is so, what happens when our memories fails? Does this mean that things one cannot remember do not exist or did not happen?

The knowledge issue here is *to what extent can memory verify reality and truth?*  This knowledge issue touches upon three Areas of Knowledge: Ethics, Human Science and History. In terms of ethical decision making, how one’s morality affected by past knowledge will influence what is truly right from wrong. In Psychology, mental illness interferes with patient’s accuracy in memory. In History, sources are used to reveal to past’s truths without using evidence instead of memory.

Moral relativism addresses how one learns their moral values and how this is shaped by the environment that they have been raised in. Therefore, the ethical knowledge one knows at present is influenced by what they have been taught in the past. This means that remembering life lessons such as, “Killing is wrong”, will affect that same person’s moral compass in the future. For instance, a child may be taught that cockroaches are bad because they infest the house. So at present, the child’s instinct reaction when they see a cockroach is to get rid of the bug. This logic is based on previous information that has been remember and now affects their decision making. So, in terms of the Knowledge issue, memory serves greatly when understanding the true reasons behind the moral decisions we make at present.

But at the same time, one can argue that children are subconsciously influenced by the past and not so much by remembering specific events. For examples, many child soldiers found in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Chad are desensitized to violence “at a very formative time in their development and this can psychologically damage them for life”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When thinking about how the mind works, it is most difficult in the Human Sciences to use memory as a verification of reality and truth. This is because what one thinks they remember as accurate is subjective to each person. For example, the psychological disease dementia, which is a chronic impairment to cognitive function due to neuron cell lose. This effects include memory disorder, personality changes, and impaired reason. For someone with such a disease, there are various aspects of the past that they cannot recall. Thereby meaning, that what they can not remember is presumably did not happen. So on an individual basis, memory may not be a viable enough to use to indefinitely say what reality is and what is false.

However, from a societal point of view, the memory of many people can be more accurate when trying to solve the truth. In the film *The Vow,* a couple is in a car crash, resulting in the wife’s memory loss of her husband. From her perspective, her husband is a stranger, who has no emotional connection to her. However, obviously those unaffected by the accident know that the couple are husband and wife. Despite the wife’s lack of recollection of her husband, she agrees to go back home with him on the basis of those others around her as they verified that she and the man are, in fact married. This real-life situation demonstrates that something becomes more believable and truer when more people can testify that is it true.

Much like how the more people that say something is true in Human Sciences, history used strong supporting evidence to verify what memory and lack of witnesses cannot. History is based on records of the past, that have nothing to do with memory. Historians are able to find evidenced of historic records, and used pieces here and they to be together in order to find concrete facts that happened in the past. So using Historic logic, memory is entirely useless when inferring the truth, as pieces of evidence can come together to create an image that is most probably true.

Although, memory is not needed in history (as it is impossible to having living witnesses), there are areas were truth without memory in History is questionable. For one, historians are unable to repeat and experiment, or have multiple trials. Like the Human Sciences, repetition or what is claimed as true makes it seem more true. So for history, a lack of recurring evidence may be faulty to believe. Also, history is only recorded from the lives of select view (the wealth who could read and write), meaning all other social classes were left out of the picture. This selectively in the source of evidence is an others shortfall history has buy *not* using memory to verify what really happened in the past.

In conclusion, memory can and not be used to verify reality and truth. For varying Areas of Knowledge, the answer to this Knowledge issue will be different. This is seen through the exploration of this question through the 3 Areas of Knowledge: Ethics, Human Science and History. With ethics, memory can serve greatly in influencing our moral values at present, as our past environment affects our judgment in the present. At the same time, some may argue that specific memories are not need for this, as one can subconsciously be influenced depending on what stage of life they are in. For Human Science, memory is very subjective on an individual basis. This therefore means that people who all recollect different things from one another maybe have a difficult time deciphering the truth. But, when more people remember the same thing (consistency), verifying what is true may seem much easier. And in relation to History, memory is seemingly useless as historians use bodies of evidence to build an argument that is probably true.

1. "Child Soldiers | War Child - The charity for children affected by war." *The Charity for Children affected by War | War Child*. War Child UK, n.d. Web. 31 Jan. 2013. <http://www.warchild.org.uk/issues/child-soldiers>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)